**Q & A With JFK Biographer Fredrik Longvall**

Fredrik Longvall is a Harvard University professor who is researching and writing a biography of JFK. He recently answered a question from a student interviewer.

Katima (student interviewer):

So, I have a question about Kennedy’s legacy. What are some essential lessons . . . students should learn from Kennedy’s life and legacy?

Professor Longvall:

. . . I’m glad you posed the question because it’s of central importance. I think about this a lot with respect to my own students. I think it’s in part about understanding that anything in life that’s worthwhile requires hard work. I think he understood that. He had privilege, . . . [The Kennedy family] had great wealth. He had also, as an Irish Catholic, experienced discrimination — not as much as his parents or his grandparents — I write about this in the book, how the early generations of Irish Catholics suffered time and time again — but even JFK, at Harvard, for example, there were certain “final clubs,” as the elite clubs here at Harvard are called, that would never admit a Catholic. Are you kidding? No way. But I think he determined early on that there’s no substitute for hard work and that’s, I think, a lesson for all of us, not just for [students] but for all of us . . . to remember. . . . [That He had a] commitment to democracy, to politics, I think is something that we should all also take from the young JFK and also from the latter-day JFK. The belief, which he again got from his parents, in the importance of attaching yourself to something greater than yourself. . . is so powerful. I think in terms of whether our democracy thrives or doesn’t will depend on people following that lead.

You know it’s extraordinary . . . and this is something I’m going to write about in the book, but the number of Americans of a certain age who heard his inaugural address . . . “Ask not what your country can do . . . ask what you can do for your country” — which, by the way, was a line that — he went to Choate, a prep school. His Choate headmaster used a version of that line to describe what Choate was about. So, this was something that been instilled in him early, that they used in the Inaugural Address.

The number of people who were inspired by that Inaugural Address — what an address thirteen, fourteen hundred words is all it was — one of the great inaugural addresses in the nation’s history — who were inspired by that to dedicate themselves to public service is an amazing number. I encounter people all the time who basically said, “I had to drop what I was doing and come to Washington or at least dedicate myself in some way to [public service]. So that’s, I think, a really important message: this belief that he had that democracy requires being informed. It requires citizens being informed. It requires a commitment to reasoned discourse. Good faith bargaining between the parties — that’s essential to a democracy — but in good faith. Lots there, too, Katima, in terms of what I would want my undergraduates or all of us, high school students, but all of us wherever we are in life to take away from this from this President. . . .\